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Girl Under The Kimono: Journey Through The Walks Taken By Sayuri, A Nine Year Old Girl
To Become A Renowned Geisha In The Light Of *Memoirs Of A Geisha* By Arthur Golden

Abstract

Arthur Golden is the man who dared to write about the mind of a geisha. Geisha is not a prostitute as is the idea held by West but her job is to entertain groups of men with drinks, games, witty remarks and so on. The 9-year-old Chiyo's life from a poor fishing village to as a geisha is portrayed in the novel. The paper tries to examine the mindset of Chiyo althrough her journey from her home in Yoroido to Sayuri in Gion. Arthur Golden clearly draws the emotions and feeling of Sayuri both as a geisha and a woman. It is the destiny of ours which leads us to wherever we are. Sayuri journeys through many obstacles and difficulties to be a successful geisha. Meanwhile she also tries to satisfy her own feelings and emotions and tries to grab what she wants in her life.

Keywords: Sayuri, geisha, woman, destiny, determination

Introduction

The American author, Arthur Golden's debut novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha* published in 1977, is a historical fiction novel which tells the story of a fictional geisha working in Kyoto, Japan, before and after World War II. The novel is written in English and is translated into 32 different languages. It reveals the hidden world of the Japanese life style. To write "Memoirs of a Geisha", he had to cross three great boundaries, gender, nationality and history. He had to envisage what it would be like to be a 9-year-old girl sold to a geisha house. He had to identify with what the same character at 15 would feel when she faced the nasty old man who had just made the highest bid in an auction of her virginity. He also had to know the smallest details of her daily life: how she would apply her makeup and create her elaborate hairstyle.

"Memoirs of a Geisha" is about 9-year-old Chiyo, a girl with unusual gray-blue eyes, who is sold by her destitute father to an okiya, or geisha house. She is initiated into the geisha's rigorous rites, lessons in dancing and playing the shamisen, a banjo-like instrument, and in the art of the tea ceremony. Even though she worked hard in the okiya and performed quite appreciable in the school, she is bullied by an exquisite and rivalrous geisha, Hatsumomo, who can be said as a popular geisha lives in same okiya as Chiyo's. She is a bitch and she tries to make Chiyo's life as wretched as possible. Pumpkin, the only friend of Chiyo in the Okiya, is of the same age as hers and they together go to a geisha school. Chiyo tries to run away from the Okiya which ended up as a failure and become a maid there.

Mameha is another successful geisha and she's the chief enemy of Hatsumomo. She becomes Chiyo's big sister and teaches her to be a geisha. This time Pumpkin becomes the younger sister of Hatsumomo and an apprentice geisha. In front of the training given by Mameha, Chiyo now known as Sayuri, becomes a winning image in the Gion.

Journey Of Chiyo To Sayuri

Chiyo: The Girl With Startling Eyes

“...that afternoon when I met Mr. Tanaka Ichiro really was the best and the worst of my life..... If I had never known him, I’m sure I would not have become a geisha. ” (7).

When as a simple girl, daughter of a fisherman, Chiyo lived in what she called a “tipsy house” (8). She had the eyes of her mother which is not dark brown as everyone else’s but a translucent gray. It is because of “...too much water in her personality...” (9).

Chiyo was sold off together with her elder sister, Satsu, as their father can’t support them anymore and their ailing mother is going to die soon. She misunderstood the care taken by Mr. Tanaka Ichiro. Through his words he created a sort of trust in her mind and she was of the thought that he is going to adopt her. “Certainly it was true that a part of me hoped desperately to be adopted by Mr. Tanaka after my mother died...” (21).

Her sister and she were taken away by Tanaka and sent to Kyoto. There the elder sister was sold off to a brothel to become a prostitute whereas Chiyo was in an okiya, which is the house of a geisha. Thus they also got separated. It is evident from the reaction of everyone who sees Chiyo that it is her eyes which attracts each one to her.

As like water, she was flowing with the life of hers and has no control over her own life. As a maid in Nitta okiya, Chiyo worked hard and forever dominated by Granny, Mother and Auntie. She had no voice and always wanted to obey what Hatsumomo was saying.

All this time she was searching for her lost sister secretly and at last meet her at Tatsuyo where she was working as a prostitute. They planned their escape. Albeit trying hard, Chiyo couldn’t do the escape and ended up in breaking her arm. However Satsu won in fleeing away

from that hell like place. It's only after many days when Chiyo understood the importance of almanac in the life of people living in Gion.

“Satsu had checked her almanac. That was probably what she'd done when she left me there in the room under the stairwell at the Tatsuyo for a few minutes. And he'd certainly been right to do it: she had escaped, while I hadn't” (127).

When Mameha read her almanac on the very day she tried to flee with Satsu in her own words:

“This was the moment when I began to understand how unaware I'd been-not only in planning to run away, but in everything. I'd never understood how closely things are connected to one another.....we must use whatever methods we can to understand the movement of the universe around us and time our actions so that we are not fighting the currents, but moving with them.”(127)

On that day she learned a trick to live her life better by moving with the things connected with her. Mameha decided to talk with Mrs, Nitta concerning adopting of Chiyo as her younger sister. Mrs.Nitta was not much interested in this for two reasons that she was not in much fond of Chiyo and less confident in her abilities, and she was not ready to get her debts unpaid. She was twelve then when she restarted her lessons after a long two years break.

“.. a geisha must study a great many arts besides shamisen. And in fact, the “gei” of “geisha” means “arts,” so the word “geisha” really means “artisan” or “artist.”... In a banquet or any sort of informal gathering in Gion, geisha usually dance to nothing more than the accompaniment of a shamisen or perhaps a singer. But for stage performances, such as *Dances of the Old Capital* every spring, six or more shamisen players join together as an ensemble, backed by various types of drums and also a Japanese flute we call *fue*. So you see, a geisha must try her

hand at all of these instruments, even though eventually she'll be encouraged to specialize in one or two." (142)

Her life during these years was so tough and hectic. She was responsible for more works she could manage even though some chores were taken away from her. And also life with Hatsumomo was much difficult as she was really a cruel and unkind woman. From Mameha she learned the only way to get rid of that devilish woman. A geisha won't be successful unless she finds her freedom. "Until a geisha has assembled her own collection of Kimono – or until she's been adopted as the daughter of an okiya, which is just about the same thing- she'll be in someone else's power all her life." (146). And the only way to get that is by having a *danna*.

A geisha never marries and it's the *danna* who provides her with what she wants. And she is the mistress of the *danna*. "A true geisha will never soil her reputation by making herself available to men on a nightly basis." (147). A geisha without a *danna* "is like a stray cat on the street without a master to feed it." (148)

All these years she was dedicated herself to be a geisha and unknowingly changed the landscape of her mind. She was never bothered about her days at home or about the sad news she received several weeks before about her family. Mameha moulded Chiyo in every way to be a faultless geisha. As Chiyo was much determined and the water in her personality helped her much to flow with the current, she done with the exact what Mameha instructed. She felt as "my new life was still beginning, though my old life had come to an end some time ago." (161)

That Geisha She Wanted To Become

In the Gion shrine "...thanked them for having granted me the wish I'd pleaded for three and a half years earlier, that I should become a geisha." (166). the ceremony took place in Ichiriki Teahouse and there she become the novice geisha Sayuri. Mameha introduced her to everyone

she knows and made her meet the important people that can change the course of her life. Thus came Dr. Crab, the Baron, and Nobu Toshikazu to the life of Sayuri. The Chairman was there in her life far before any others.

Mizuage ranks high of all the important moments in the life of a geisha. It was Dr. Crab who becomes the mizuage patron of Sayuri. He was agreed to pay 11,500 yen for Sayuri's mizuage. Thus she set a new record and it remained until 1951. Soon she earned reputation as a coveted geisha. She was able to pay all her debts to okiya. As Mameha and Sayuri planned, when she acquired more and more money, Mother decided to adopt Sayuri as her daughter. Being a daughter to an okiya, her earnings will flow to the accounts of okiya and also she finds a sort of freedom than anyone in the okiya. This prompted Hatsumomo and Pumpkin got desperate. But Mother never minded anyone and Sayuri's life become safe through the adoption to the okiya and she thereafter known as Nitta Sayuri. During the Great Depression her *danna* General Totturi helped them in many ways but after caught by the administration he couldn't offer any help. When Second World War breaks out, the government closes the geisha districts. Things become so worse. Nobu uses his influence to find Sayuri the safe and relatively easy job of sewing parachutes in a village outside of Kyoto.

After the war, Nobu was in a situation losing his business but with the help of Sayuri he entertained a Japanese official named Sato, who can influence the officials and prevent seizing the business of Nobu. Sato helped them. With the business secure, Nobu proposes himself as Sayuri's *danna*—a patron who gives a geisha lavish gifts in return for sexual privileges. As she is much indebted to Nobu she unwillingly agrees to the proposal. She was unwilling in her mind because from the very day she met Chairman in her girlhood, he was the only 'love' she has. Even after many years she kept the kerchief given by the Chairman to her when she was a girl.

It was their trip to Amami an island near Okinawa, to celebrate the good things happened to Iwamura Electricals that changed the destiny of Sayuri. Even though she was a successful geisha, mental happiness was much less to her everytime. All she wishes was the Chairman. When they roam around the island they stepped into a theatre. Walking out of the theatre she got an idea to make Nobu withdraw his proposal as her *danna*.

“...I kept asking myself whether I was fully sane to be considering this plan; but whatever misgivings I may have felt, they weren’t enough to stop me from going ahead with it.”(399)

She asked help of Pumpkin. When she was making sex with the Minister at the theatre, pumpkin was told by Sayuri to take Nobu there to see that and thus leaving the proposal. But pumpkin brought Chairman there and she was taking revenge on Sayuri for those entire things she had done to her life and “...stole what was mine” (406). Here she refers mainly to the adoption done by Mother as Sayuri the daughter of the okiya.

Back in Kyoto, one day Iwamura Electrics requested Sayuri’s presence that evening. There she expected Nobu but to her surprise appeared was Chairman. Chairman recalled the day he met her for the first time Sayuri, as a little girl and the love he felt for her. Sayuri presented before the Chairman the handkerchief she was keeping all these years and confessed how she feels towards him from that very day. Both were surprised as it is the first time they know each other’s feelings. He revealed it was his efforts that Mameha took her as her younger sister and helped her to become a successful geisha. She disclosed what really happened at Amami. “What I did on Amami, I did because my feelings for you, Chairman” (416). Overcome with emotion, the Chairman pulls her close and kisses her. Chairman knowing Sayuri’s intention from Pumpkin

settled Nobu at Amami itself and hearing what happened at the theatre from the Chairman Nobu left his proposal on that same day.

Weeks later Chairman becomes her *danna* and she was no longer a geisha after that. As he was already married he couldn't marry her. "...the Chairman agreed to pay the okiya a very considerable sum each month on the condition that Mother permit me to end my career...because I'd set my sights on becoming a geisha only to win the affections of the chairman, probably I ought to have felt no sense of loss in withdrawing from Gion"(421)

Sayuri, now the mistress of the Chairman, often spends time with him and accompanies him in his business tour. Later, when she was pregnant with the heir of the Chairman, she moved from Gion to NewYork city and set up a small tea house for Japanese businessman and politicians travelling through United States. She spends her time in a variety of ways and is leading a quite comfortable life. The novel ends with the following lines;

"...our world is no more permanent than a wave rising on the ocean. Whatever our struggles and triumphs, however we may suffer them, all too soon they bleed into a wash, just like watery ink on paper."(428)

Conclusion

Sayuri, is introduced in the beginning as a girl with too much water in her personality. As the feature of water she also moves with whatever situations she is in. As a maid lives in Gion, she was very much attracted to the beauty of the kimono and the make up a geisha wears. It's the outer beauty she was looking then. She also had the strong urge to be a geisha then. Being the younger sister of Mameha, as an obedient sister Sayuri undoubtedly follows the way Mameha shows. But at a certain point of life she tries to change whatever comes to her. She was then

having strong emotions towards the Chairman and she was unable to share this even with Mameha. Destiny comes into play because Geisha where thought to not be able to choose their destiny's they went with the flow but Sayuri was able to find a way around destiny by ending up with the Chairman.

Life of women as a geisha was not beautiful as sees from outside. Arthur Golden shows it evidently that geisha are experiencing a sort of mental conflict. Inorder to exist as a successful one they need to find a wealthy man whom they call as *danna*. No one could offer them a satisfied life as a woman. Geisha never get married and they are mistresses of *danna*. They are also bound to restrictions although their life. Geisha are not free to find true love and have romance with that person. They live their life always serving men and entertaining them.

Sayuri, the girl who experienced many of these at last was able to find the man she loves as her *danna*. It was for getting attached to the Chairman she even wished to become a geisha. From the 'tipsy house' in the fishing village to the Nitta okiya was really painful journey for her. But from the position of a maid to a successful geisha in Gion was the road of sheer determination and strong feelings she had taken. She reached where she wanted to become and finally got what she loves.

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